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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MELBOURNE 000035

SENSITIVE

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DEPT FOR DS/TIA/ITA; DS/IP/EAP; AF

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Ethiopians Rally at Consulate Seeking Release of "Political Prisoners"

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Approximately 55 Ethiopian nationals rallied in front of the U.S. Consulate General in Melbourne protesting against the "despotic" regime of Prime Minister Meles Zenawai and calling for the release of "political prisoners." The rally was peaceful and organized by "Australian Ethiopians for the Support of Democracy in Ethiopia." The group presented a letter to the President (excerpted below) asking that the U.S. halt all forms of direct assistance to the Zenawai regime. End Summary.

Peaceful Protest

¶2. (SBU) Approximately 55 mainly Ethiopian nationals rallied peacefully in front of the U.S. Consulate General in Melbourne on March 2. Media did not cover the event and police made no arrests. The "Australian Ethiopians for the Support of Democracy in Ethiopia" group organized the event and stated that the rally was intended to build support for the release of "political prisoners" in Ethiopia and to influence U.S. policy vis-a-vis the Zenawai government in Ethiopia.

¶3. (SBU) Protesters chanted: "stop the murder" and "what do we want - justice!" Banners demanded the release of Tewodros Kassahun (Teddy Afro), Birtukan Mideska, and Abera Yemaneab. One banner read "Obama!! We hope you stand with Ethiopian people." The Melbourne rally was the Australian iteration of similar protests planned in Washington, D.C., and at the U.S. missions in London, Berne, Oslo, Munich, Rome, and Stockholm on March 2.

Excerpts of a Letter to the President

¶4. (SBU) Pol/econ off accepted a letter dated March 2, 2009 addressed to the President, several excerpts of which have been provided below. A full copy of the letter has been sent to the EAP/APN desk at State.

Begin excerpts:

-- "We Australian-Ethiopians call for your new administration to apply direct and indirect pressure on the despotic Ethiopian regime of Prime Minister Meles Zenawai in order to force change from the

distractive course it has locked the Ethiopian people and itself into."

-- "We especially plead with the US for it to halt all forms of direct assistance to the regime and limit itself only to humanitarian aid delivered through non-governmental channels."

-- "Such an act by the United States, which will be supported by a number of other democratic nations, some of whom have similar measures already in place, will greatly help in bringing about an end to the nightmarish existence the Ethiopian people have been subjected to by this brutal regime for so long."

-- The letter lists "flagrant human rights abuses past and present perpetuated by the Meles Zenawai regime" such as "systematically harassing and abusing members of opposition parties, journalists, human rights advocates, members and leaders of civil societies" as well as "continued extrajudicial killing, abduction, imprisonment and torture of opponents of the regime."

-- "Incomprehensively, however, all the appalling records of the Meles Zenawai regime and his criminal gang were not a deterrent to the previous US administration of George Bush who still recruited it for its indirect intervention in Somalia. The intervention was to stop that country from becoming a hotbed of terrorism and other such criminalities by restoring law and order and encouraging moderations."

End excerpts.

Comment

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¶5. (SBU) This is the first demonstration held at the U.S. Consulate in Melbourne since the President's inauguration. Organizers of the rally told pol/econ off that they see this as a "time of change" and an opportunity to influence U.S. policy. The participants were polite and said that they were "very grateful" for the chance to express their views to the new administration.

THURSTON